

**Evolution and Us:
How Charles Darwin Made Reform Judaism Possible
*Parashat Yitro; February 13, 2009***

You know, the dates don't work out exactly. But I'm convinced there is a connection anyway. If you ask me, I don't think Reform Judaism would be possible, without the work of Charles Darwin.

This night we heard, this Shabbat we know... Jews around the world read from the Torah the words of the Ten Commandments. We hear the ancient imperatives, we explore their meaning, we understand their role as a foundation of moral society – and yet we disagree, we Americans, on what their physical presence in our civil society should be. Hang Ten? Maybe not. For Catholics, Jews and Protestants all “count” the ten slightly differently... and the minute a display of the Ten Commandments goes up, the government has placed itself squarely in the business... of endorsing one of those readings over another. Even if all three of these religious communities were in agreement over the exact formulation, still, this would be the government putting these three communities in a privileged position over all other traditions, a position many in this country advocate but which I suspect almost all of us oppose.

And besides, in the cutting assessment of our own Reform movement's Rabbi David Saperstein, hanging the ten commandments “as some kind of visual muzak in the background will do about as much

good for morality in our classrooms as having the Gideon Bible in the drawer does for morality in our motel rooms.”

The importance of the Ten Commandments should be clear to all religious people. Their role in our country, though, remains one of the most contentious issues in the so-called cultural war.

One of the other issues near the top of that list, of course, right up there alongside abortion and gay-marriage... is the question... of the teaching of evolution. And it is this question, on this, the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin, that I would like focus on tonight.

In taking the time, in the midst of a religious service, to open ourselves up to a scientific theory, if speaking this Shabbat about evolution, we are not the first, and we are not alone. In the fall of 2004, in response to a series of anti-evolution policies passed by a local school board in the small town of Grantsburg, Wisconsin, an American biologist named Michael Zimmerman worked with clergy throughout the state of Wisconsin to prepare a statement in support of teaching evolution. The response, according to Zimmerman’s website, was overwhelming. In a few weeks, nearly 200 clergy signed the statement, which was sent to the Grantsburg school board on December 16, 2004. Additionally, groups of educators and scientists sent [letters](#) to the Grantsburg School Board and to the Superintendent of Schools protesting these policies. In response to

all of this attention, as well as the efforts of others, the Grantsburg School Board retracted their policies.

The project blossomed into a national effort. “The Clergy Letter Project” now provides a letter signed by hundreds of rabbis, as well as tens of thousands of Christian clergy. And what began, in 2006, as “Evolution Sunday” has, in recognition of Jewish participation, now grown into “Evolution Weekend.” The core message is the fundamental compatibility of science and the spirit, free inquiry with religious faith. And, in perusing their website, I even came across a sample sermon given by a former member of this congregation. Jonathan Selinger, now a professor of Chemical Physics at Kent State University, spoke on Evolution Shabbat at his new congregation in Hudson, Ohio, a year ago this Shabbat.

Dr. Selinger looked back, beyond Darwin, to the words of the Rambam, Maimonides, who wrote already in the 12th century, in his famous letter to the Jews of Yemen, that “what the Torah says about the Account of Creation is not all to be taken literally, as believed by the masses... Rather we should endeavor to integrate the Torah with rational thought, affirming that events take place in accordance with the natural order.” He also cited a responsa, written in 2005, by the Rabbinical Council of America – the umbrella organization of modern Orthodox rabbis, stating that “evolutionary theory, properly understood,

is not incompatible with belief in a Divine Creator, nor with the first two chapters of Genesis.”

Strong words, from traditional sources. Evidence, perhaps, of a hermeneutical flexibility, an interpretive tradition which allows experience and experiment, texts and test-tubes to coexist, and inform one another.

But if the harmonization of contemporary scientific understandings and ancient texts is *possible* even in parts of the traditional Jewish world, it is, I would argue, *essential*, indeed, even *definitional* for liberal Jews. I would go so far as to say that the concept of evolution, of growth and selection and change, is, in fact, the single most central insight of Reform Judaism.

It is not even just that we are open to the science. From the very first organized articulation of the principles of Reform Judaism in this country, the famous Pittsburgh Platform of 1885, we Reform Judaism have expressed our allegiance to the methods and message of the modern world. One of the earliest points made in that document was that:

We hold that the modern discoveries of scientific researches in the domain of nature and history are not antagonistic to the doctrines of Judaism, the Bible reflecting the primitive ideas of its own age, and at times clothing its conception of divine Providence and Justice dealing with men in miraculous narratives.

When it came to any perceived conflict, then, between the contemporary world and an ancient perspective, well, at least as we saw things in the late 19th-century, the new was going to prevail over the old every time.

But it is not in the assumptions underlying the first half of the sentence I just quoted that the radical compatibility with evolution may be found, but, rather, in the second half. Even if we take a half-step away from the judgmental pronouncement, dripping disdain which comes through in the word “primitive,” nevertheless it is in the assertion that one stage of our religious life reflected the ages of its time, but that time marches forward, understanding changes, new perspectives arise, here, it is, that we find the idea of evolution in the soft science of sociology and history.

Without the concept of evolution, Reform Judaism does not exist.

For we believe that, just as the genome, the human spirit opens up to new traits, and new utilities, new wonders and new perspectives over the course of time. Blessed with a tradition that taught the dignity of all human beings as made in the divine image, but which tolerated prejudice and subjugated women, it has been an unfolding of potential over history, a growth and a change to bring out the possibilities which, we see now, were inherent from the very beginning. Schooled in the sacred power of one holy tongue, we were the ones to say that the mind

may well be touched in new ways by the use of a more familiar language – and then we have experimented and tinkered with the balance of languages ever since. Bearers of a heritage which lifts up the spirit in sound – indeed, which even asserts, in the ancient words of Psalms, that we are to sing unto God a *new* song – still it took until our movement, and our time, to consciously grasp that the contemporary modality of worship was one of the best ways to touch the heart... and that the very nature of the experience of contemporary is that it is not static, but continues to grow and change over time. Music, in other words, in the sound of the world around us. It is what we have always done. It is just not something, we have ever been able to admit before.

Indeed, it is the insight of Reform Judaism that this is what *Judaism* is, that we have always grown with, responded to, changed from our encounter with the world around us. The only constant in our history is the fact of this sacred process: the balancing of old and new, preserving our identity in new ways, with new forms, in the world as it is.

Evolution is an ongoing experiment, with pathways that lead nowhere, and surprising, unexpected successes. Some of the most haphazard and dead-end runs of Darwin's explorations are found in the history of our movement, as we have tried on ideas, experimented with what would work, only to realize that some changes will lose all organic continuity with the communal past. Such ideas as the Sunday Sabbath, or opposition to the concept of a Jewish state, withered and died off as

an evolutionary diversion, branches from the main flow which nurtured no one, and led nowhere. Accidental experiments, such as a group of idealistic North American youth wanting to found a kibbutz, or a woman complaining that she felt left out hearing God constantly referred to as a man, have flourished, and enriched our lives.

This week we remember, and we celebrate the life of a man who changed the world. Charles Darwin uncovered a mystery of nature, how species evolve over the course of centuries.

But in our lives we know that the debt we owe is great. For it is not just nature that evolves. Our movement has been the one to say: it is also our tradition which evolves, the texts themselves, woven together over time and not God-given in the way we once thought they were... the way we see the world, the way we carry ourselves in it.

In our celebration of tradition, our coming together in continuity, may we also be open to the life-giving energy that comes from the new, as well as the settled and satisfying comfort of the old. May we always remember that as Charles' children, as Darwin's heirs, it is not the unchanging and stable which survives, nor only the most whimsical innovations... but, slowly, over time... the balance between the two.

Happy Birthday, Dr. Darwin.

And Shabbat Shalom.